Did Ludwig Wittgenstein write the most successful love story of his century? Did Thomas Hobbes compose an opera – and did it inspire the work of Mozart? Did Byron write poems about Hume or Leibniz? Did Schiller compose sonnets about Descartes and Locke? These questions seem too ridiculous to warrant an answer. Ask the same questions about Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) and the opposite is true. The composer of *Le devin du village* (the favourite opera of Louis XV), the author of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (the best-selling novel in the eighteenth century), Rousseau was more than the famed educationalist and the ‘author of the French revolution’. He inspired Mozart, Derrida, Tolstoi, Kant, Marie Antoinette, Emile Durkheim, Byron, Goethe and Simone Weil, as well as politicians like Maximilien Robespierre, Thomas Jefferson, Simon de Bolivar and John F. Kennedy.

It is not surprising that this literary genius continues to fascinate. ‘A classic’, noted T.S. Eliot, ‘is someone who establishes a culture’ (Eliot 1975: 402). Few others than Plato, Virgil and Christ (and the latter, arguably, had unfair parental support!) can lay claim to this status. As one scholar has put it, ‘In our time Rousseau is usually cited as a classic of early modern political philosophy. He is more than that: he is the central figure in the history of modern philosophy and perhaps the pivotal figure in modern culture as a whole’ (Velkley 2002: 31). Rousseau belongs to the noble few. Reviled and ridiculed, liked or loathed, the Swiss vagabond, who never attended university, let alone owned land or held privileges is, perhaps, alongside Karl Marx, the only modern thinker who qualifies as a ‘classic’.

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? (St Matthew, 16.26)
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Rousseau was aware of his genius but not unaware of his humble beginnings. ‘Never forget’, he wrote, ‘that he who is speaking is neither a philosopher, nor a scholar, but a simple man, a man of truth, unprejudiced, without a system’ (Rousseau in Riley 2001: 12). But he was also a sensitive – if occasionally paranoid – man, who penned the most penetrating, revealing, and at times, pathetic autobiography in the history of Western literature, namely Les Confessions. Having antagonised his former friends among the Encyclopédistes, the Genevan authorities, the Catholic Church, and just about everyone else, Rousseau did himself few favours by writing his Confessions – and his other autobiographical writings, Dialogues: Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques (1776), Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire (1778), and his letters to the French censor Malesherbes in 1762. As Byron noted about Rousseau, in Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage: ‘His life was one long war with self-sought foes’ (Byron 1994: 214).

He had wanted to defend himself against the authorities, and against the accusations levied against his educational tract, Émile ou de l’Éducation (1762). To this effect he wrote, albeit unsuccessfully, Lettres écrites de la montagne (1764), which made matters worse. Increasingly paranoid, he turned to his apologiae; his autobiographical writings. How many pages does it take to write mea culpa? Rousseau didn’t seem to know.

It cannot be denied that Rousseau created art out of his sufferings, nor that these writings themselves contain elements of a profound political philosophy. Yet not everybody has been convinced. Paul de Man, the American literary critic, found that ‘the more there is to expose the more there is to be ashamed of; the more resistance to exposure the more satisfying the scene’ (De Man 1979: 285). Perhaps. But there is also another interpretation. Namely that Rousseau’s philosophy is based on the assertion that man is naturally good and has been corrupted by society. This was metaphorically reflected in his autobiographical writings, argues a perceptive scholar:

The picture of Jean-Jacques’s departure from and return to nature is a part of the moral fable of the Confessions as well as a complementary part of Rousseau’s system. With the account of his own life, Rousseau gives a persuasive image of human experience. Jean-Jacques may be too idiosyncratic and at times too unattractive to be an exemplary figure. Nevertheless, the description of his experience does transform the readers of the confessions by exposing them to a new way of looking at life. (Kelly 1987: 248)

Perhaps so, however, the public perception of Rousseau was not softened as a result of his personal revelations of his misdeeds. Edmund Burke –
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his staunchest and first major critic – wrote scornfully (in *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*) that ‘the insane Socrates of the National Assembly [Rousseau], was impelled to publish his mad confessions of his mad faults, and to attempt a new sort of glory’ (Burke 1991: 512).

Not exactly a ringing endorsement, nor indeed a correct assessment – but a view adopted by many,3

Why did Rousseau write this autobiography? What is the point of revealing one’s faults to one’s enemies? It seems that he – a man of letters – believed that he could alter the public’s perception by explaining the background. He misjudged the public. To understand all is not always to forgive all. Perhaps he should have known better. It is certainly ironic that Rousseau, at calmer moments, let Julie utter that ‘taking so much trouble to justify oneself sometimes produces the contrary result’ (Rousseau 1968, Letter XXXV from Julie). Maybe he should have heeded the advice of his fictional heroine.4 He did not do this when he (ten years later) handed out notes to the Parisian citizens, complaining that France, ‘once kind and affectionate’, had ‘changed towards an unfortunate foreigner who is alone and without support and defender’ (I: 998).

It is hard not to resort to adjectives such as pathetic, mad or loony when describing this behaviour. Of course, Rousseau was not always like this – not even at the darkest periods of his life. It is worth remembering that Rousseau, at the very same time when he handed out desperate notes, also composed the supremely analytical *Considérations sur la gouvernement de Pologne* (1771).

Who was the real Rousseau? What was he like? A complex individual to be sure. However, his contemporaries’ assessments of him were remarkably similar, consistent and positive. Giacomo Casanova, who visited the philosopher in 1759, described him as ‘a man who reasoned well, whose manner was simple and modest’ (Casanova 1968: 223). David Hume concurred, finding him, ‘mild and gentle and modest and good humoured’ (Hume 1932: 527). These portraits complement the picture painted of him by Thomas Bentley. Recalling a discussion that touched upon subjects as diverse as the geological interpretation of fossils and the American declaration of independence, Bentley wrote:

He is a musical instrument above the concert pitch, and therefore too elevated for the present state of society, and all his singularities and errors, as they are called, proceed from the delicacy of his sensations. I was so taken up by his intellect that I almost forgot how it was clothed, though I remember he has a small slender body, rather below the common size, that he has a thin palish face with delicate features, and that he has great deal of
expression in his eyes and countenance when he is either pleased or displeased, one of which he certainly is every moment; for nothing that he sees or hears or thinks of is indifferent to him. When nature was making this singular being, one could imagine she intended him for the air, but before she had finished his wings he eagerly sprung out of her hands, and his unfinished body sank down to the earth. (Bentley quoted in France 1979: 9)

Not all of his contemporaries agreed. Voltaire held him in utter contempt – on hearing the news of Rousseau’s death he wrote that ‘he ate like a devil, getting indigestion, he died like a dog’ (Voltaire 1973: 181). And this was one of his milder remarks! Yet there is a remarkable consistency in the descriptions of him as a simple man who seemed to personify his philosophical ideals of a romanticised Sparta.

No introduction to philosophy is complete without a narrative of the life of Rousseau. The story – recently (and admirably) told by the late Maurice Cranston (Cranston 1983; 1997) – has become almost mythological, and is well known even to less than avid readers of the European Canon. The story of the watch-maker’s son from Geneva who failed to return to his apprenticeship, when he found himself locked out of the city, and the tale of how he – a young man abandoned by his father – was taken in by Mme de Warrens, who converted him to Catholicism (and then seduced him!), is often retold. All this has become part of the tapestry of Western Kulturgeschichte. So too have the misdeeds of the famous and progressive educationalist who abandoned his own children to an unknown fate. As if this wasn’t enough Rousseau also revealed to the world how he suffered from urinary retention (I: 361).

Rousseau was trained in music. The musical training provided him with a vocational skill. For like most of the great men of letters, Rousseau did not earn his living from teaching at a university. It was note-copying, not writing, that provided him with a (modest) income. In the years before he was catapulted to fame he was extremely strapped for cash. After leaving Les Charmettes (Mme de Warrens’ chateau) he tried his luck as a teacher for Mably’s unruly children (and wrote an early treatise on the subject). Working as a tutor for the aristocracy was not uncommon among philosophers (Hobbes and Locke both earned their living in this way). However Rousseau – the great educationalist – showed little aptitude for pedagogy in practice. Increasingly driven by ambition and an almost Hegelian thirst for recognition, he went to Paris to seek fortune and fame. He found neither. However, he was able to charm influential ladies, like Madame de Broglie, who helped him land a job as a secretary to de Montaigu, the French ambassador to Venice. Rousseau duly went to Italy, was captivated

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by the country, its language and its music, but humiliated by his boss – especially because of his birth as a commoner and a foreigner. The proud republican found it humiliating to be ill treated by people who owed their positions not to their talents, but to the good fortune of being born to aristocratic parents. Rousseau was embittered but did not resign to his fate. He resigned from the job – and turned his anger into political philosophy.

It is remarkable given his obsession with music that this is the least studied subject in the otherwise vast scholarly literature about him (Riley 2001: 329), yet it is questionable if Rousseau would have enjoyed the same following – and vilification – had he remained but a musician. It is highly probable that Rousseau would have been – and remained – an obscure eighteenth-century composer had he not read the prize question of the Academy in Dijon in Mercure de France, asking ‘if the re-establishment of the arts and the sciences have contributed to an improvement in the morals of man’ ("Si le rétablissement des sciences et des arts a contribué à épurer les moeurs") (III: 1). Furthermore, it is probable that his erstwhile friends among the Philosophes failed to grasp what this bon sauvage was all about, and that they – had they known the true Rousseau – would have sought to strangle him at his literary birth.

Rousseau had read the prize question to Dennis Diderot – whom he visited in prison. It might seem odd that Rousseau – an individual with professed belief in God, the afterlife and salvation through Jesus Christ (IV: 955) – shared the company of thinkers who strongly opposed religion. It seems stranger still that it was Diderot, a materialist and supporter of the Whig interpretation of history, who urged Rousseau to pen his essay. Rousseau was a man of passion to an extend that it was difficult for his fellow philosophers to fathom. Unlike the Encyclopédistes he was not a man of compromises – Voltaire was perfectly willing to stay silent; Rousseau was not.

Diderot, so it might be conjectured, saw the Dijon prize essay as just another journalistic challenge – as a possible candidate for a deconstruction of the interpretation that the arts and sciences had benefited mankind. Diderot did not – and could not – sympathise with Rousseau’s view, but saw the essay as good sport and a challenging game. For Rousseau it was anything but a game. Modernity was an evil, indeed, the evil, which had disenchanted the world. It is worth considering this aspect in some detail, as Rousseau’s discontent with modernity and secularism, perhaps more than anything else, was the cause that fired his passion.

If there is a core to Rousseau’s œuvre it would be his anti-modernism and his anti-rationalism. Philosophy – by which he meant the sciences –
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had clouded the worldview of man and led to a despair and lack of meaning (a feeling which was later to be depicted as *Sickness unto Death* by another anti-rationalist, Søren Kierkegaard). ‘Instead of removing my doubts and curing my uncertainties [the philosophers and the scientists] have shaken all my most assured beliefs concerning the questions most important to me.’ These ardent ‘missionaries of atheism’ (I: 1016) have done nothing for mankind. This feeling caused a sensation, and created a new trend in literature and politics. The sentiment that science had demystified the world – that the scientists had produced a worldview devoid of meaning by killing the graceful God of the Gospels in blind pursuit of wanton mathematical truths – was a central element in the movement, which bears the name of Romanticism, which Rousseau initiated. Without Rousseau there would have been no Shelley, no Keats, no Goethe and no Byron.

Rousseau was not a poet – although he had a go at this genre as well (Riley 2001: 3). Unlike the preachers and the poets who gave sermons against scientism, Rousseau, as a philosopher, gave ‘reasons.’ ‘They have perceived the evil, and I lay bare its causes and above all I point to something highly consoling and useful by showing that all these vices belong not so much to man, as to man badly governed,’ he wrote in *Preface to Narcissus* (II: 969). Though a cultural critic, Rousseau saw himself as a political scientist – a man who had identified the source of evil in political causes.

It is not difficult to find evidence of the same despair over the inexorable progression of what Keats called the ‘dull catalogue of common things’. In *Letter to Voltaire* (written in response to the latter’s charge that God could not be almighty and good if he permitted the earthquake in Lisbon 1755), Rousseau made a point of noting that the disaster did ‘not make [him] doubt for a moment the immortality of the soul and a beneficent providence’ (Gourevitch 2001: 219). Rousseau was a religious man, indeed a Christian in an age of scientific reasoning, although his theological views were hardly complex or sophisticated: ‘… I serve God with the simplicity of my heart’ (Rousseau 1979a: 308). As a commentator has put it, for Rousseau, the ‘essence of Christianity lies in the preaching of a truth that is immediate’ (Starobinski 1988: 69). Or, as he himself put it, in his *Observations*:

The Divine book [*ce divin Livre*] is the only book the Christians need, and the most useful of all books even for those who might not be Christians, only needs to be mediated to convey to the soul the love of its author, and the will to carry its precepts. Never did virtue speak in such terms; never
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did the deepest wisdom express itself with such energy and simplicity. One never leaves off reading it without feeling a better person than before. (III: 48–9)

This was not a popular view among the philosophers, at a time when Laplace had stated that he did not need the hypothesis of God in his system. Rousseau's personal profession of faith could be summed up in the maxim that God is good and the soul is immortal. Not exactly a majority opinion at a time when most philosophers took Voltaire's side in the debate over Lisbon, and at a time when the bulk of the intellectuals sided with Hume's agnostic view that 'by the light of reason it seems difficult to prove the immortality of the soul' (Hume 1985: 591), Rousseau went against the common trend. While having declared that he would give reasons for his views, Rousseau did not care much for proofs, nor did he succumb to doubt and despair: 'doubt is too violent a feeling. As my reason is shaken, my creed cannot bear the tension and decides against reason' (IV: 1070). Such statements of Christian – albeit non-conformist – beliefs did not however imply that his views were well received by the church. Christian thinkers – in his own day as well as after – have found it difficult to take Rousseau to their hearts, perhaps because he (again like Kierkegaard) expressed himself through 'indirect communication', i.e. through the medium of fictional characters. Just as one is never sure if it is Shakespeare or Hamlet who speaks to us, we are never quite sure if Rousseau speaks to us, or if the voices of Wolmer, Julie or the Savoyard Vicar do. Unfortunately for Rousseau – and perhaps not entirely without justification – critics have identified Rousseau's religious views with that of the Savoyard Vicar. Whatever his subsequent explanations Rousseau never denied that he – at least in large measure – shared the view of the fictional cleric. And this character did not, to put it mildly, soothe the views of official Christendom. While arguing (strongly) that 'the world is governed by a powerful and wise will' (Rousseau 1979a: 276) and confessing that 'the holiness of the Gospel speaks to the heart' (307), he seemed to suggest almost Humean agnosticism when letting the Vicar declare that 'the Gospel is full of unbelievable things, of things repugnant to reason and impossible for any sensible man to conceive or accept' (308). It is not surprising – nor unjustified – that this sentence brought down the wrath of the clerical establishment in Rome as well as in Geneva. Having elsewhere (for example in Lettre à Voltaire) taken the line of William Ockham, i.e. credo ut absurdum, Rousseau now seemed to have succumbed to non credo ut non-intelligam. Or did he? He subsequently, in Lettre à Chistophe Beaumont, argued that he had not defended the rationalist position, indeed,
he had ‘sought to combat modern materialism [and] to establish the existence of God’ (cited in Cranston 1997: 50). And there is textual evidence to support this argument. In fact, the thrust of his argument in the *Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar* is perhaps better summed up in the call for his readers to follow their inner voice: ‘respect in silence what one can neither reject or understand, and humble yourself before the Great Being’ (Rousseau 1979a: 308). That is, to submit oneself to God even when the Supreme Being’s existence might contradict reason. This is not the profession of an agnostic but that of an individual who is willing to take the leap of faith.16

Rejecting the teachings of his erstwhile friends – whose views he never shared on this subject – Rousseau set out to fight a lonely battle against modernity and for Christianity, albeit his own personal understanding of this creed.

*Life and work*

Friedrich Nietzsche (Froese 2001) – who could control his enthusiasm for Rousseau – entitled one of the chapters in *Ecce Homo* ‘Why I write such Great Books’. Not, it should be added, because of his personal merits – the reverse if anything – but because his personal failings were compensated for by the greatness of his work; ‘das Eine bin ich, das Andere sind meine Schriften’ (‘I am one thing, my writings something very different’) (Nietzsche 1969: 296). The same, it seems, is true for Rousseau; a great writer – not an admirable individual. Casanova (not that he was in a position to preach!) noted that Rousseau ‘was not what I could call a pleasant man’ (Casanova 1968: 223).

We know it all; how he sent his children to the foundling home;17 how he stole a ribbon – and blamed the misdeed on a poor girl (who suffered a cruel punishment) (I: 86); and how he abandoned a man who suffered a fit (I: 130). This is not a flattering self-portrait. Yet, it is important to remember that the main source of information is his own writings. His letters (he wrote about ten thousand) tell a rather different story.18 These letters tell a story of a man anxious to secure a pension for his simple – and it seems beloved – companion Thérèse Levasseur, and of a man with a genuine concern for the weak and unfortunate members of society. Could it be that Rousseau exaggerated? Could it be that his self-professed indiscretions, which so appealed his critics, were less than accurate?

Rousseau had won instant fame for his prize essay in 1750 (I: 356). Two years later he presented his first opera to Louis XV (I: 384). He was
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subsequently offered a life pension. He rejected it! It must have been quite
a turnaround for an impoverished foreigner (who had suffered indignity
and humiliation throughout the 1740s) that he, within a few months, was
catapulted to fame and the prospect of fortune. Celebrated, revered and
feted, he now corresponded with princes, kings and the major thinkers of
the day (Gourevitch 1997a).

It would be inaccurate in the extreme to suggest that Rousseau sought
to please – or indeed flatter – his audience. He was not a sycophant. He
noted in Confessions that he wore an unbrushed wig and had failed to
shave when he presented his Le Devin du Village for the king. It seems that
this added to the interest of his work! Nor did he make any efforts to
please his colleagues among the composers and musicians in France.

French intellectual life has canonised Rousseau, laid his remains at
Parthenon, and re-named the street where he lived from Rue Platrière to
Rue de Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Holmsten 1972: 48). It is hard to believe
that the French – a people anxiously protecting and propagating the beauty
of their language – have thus celebrated a man who attacked the ugliness
of this very language in Lettre sur la musique française.19

It was as if Rousseau’s accession to the status of philosophical celebrity
prompted him to offend everybody. As if his repeated sufferings and hu-
miliations somehow had to be repaid, as if he somehow had to settle the
score with lesser minds. Yet it is also noteworthy that he never resorted to
personal attacks or backstabbing. Rousseau is an enigma, perhaps because
we know so much about him. He sought fame, yet he publicly decried it. He
rejected vanity – or amour propre as he called it. Yet he also wanted to succeed
in the Parisian salons – and he certainly enjoyed himself there (Cranston
1991: 5). He sang the praises of the rural life, but did not settle in Geneva.

The city of Geneva reinstated his citizenship in 1755 – after the publi-
cation of his Discourse on Inequality (which contained a preface which
praised the city). Rousseau, however, did not seem anxious to practice
what he what he had preached in his Discourse. Further, he later noted
that he was upset that the city of his birth had admitted Voltaire to live in
Geneva. ‘I knew’, wrote Rousseau, ‘that this man would cause a revolution
that I should find again in my own country the tore, the airs, and the
manners which drove me from Paris’ (I: 396). This, at any rate, is what he
wrote in the Confessions. The view was different at the time, or so it seems.
His hostility towards Voltaire was less pronounced, non-existent even, in
the mid-1750s. Rousseau had, in fact, written a rather cordial letter to
Voltaire – and this happened after the latter had written his scornful (or
was it merely witty?) remark about the Discourse on Inequality:
Never has so much intelligence been deployed in an effort to make us beasts. One wants to walk on all fours after reading your book, but since I lost that habit more than sixty years ago, I fear I cannot recover it. (Voltaire 1973: 179)

In fact, it seems that many of Rousseau’s antipathies were of a later date. Rather than reacting with characteristic fury to Voltaire’s intention of moving to Geneva, Rousseau wrote a respectful letter which deserves to be quoted:

Monsieur, I must thank you in every way … being sensible of the honour you have done to my country, I share the gratitude of my fellow citizens, which I hope will be all the greater when they have profited from the instruction which you are able to give them. (Correspondance Complète Vol. III: 319)

Rousseau even remarked that it had been his ‘duty’ as a writer to ‘render homage’ to a man whom he called ‘our leader’ (III: 319).

The story somehow doesn’t add up. Was Rousseau talking about the same man? Was this the individual who would ‘cause a revolution’ in Geneva? Or, more incriminating, was the professed ‘man of truth’ trying to flatter his philosophical foe by dressing up as something that he was not (a believer in progress)? Perhaps not. In the letter Rousseau went on to say that progress had increased man’s corruption (319), yet he remained cordial and respectful. The contemptuous feud between the two great men was of a later date.

So why did Rousseau go back to France? We might get part of the answer in a letter he wrote to Jean Jallabert – a noted scholar, physician and supporter of Rousseau against his (many) critics in Geneva. The reason is simple; Rousseau could not get a job in Geneva. The rustic paradise did not provide job opportunities for a note-copier; ‘I have absolutely not a Sou to live on’ (Correspondance Complète III: 336). Further, Rousseau was not unaware of the limitations on the public intellectual in the conservative Calvinist stronghold. The clerics did not have a history of toleration – as Rousseau was to find out when Emile was burned publicly following its publication in 1762. France, while still an autocracy, had an altogether more lax attitude to censorship.

Upon his return from Geneva he moved to L’Ermitage – a resort owned by Louise-Florence d’Epinay (a wealthy Parisian woman with literary aspirations). It was here, in rural solitude, that he started to write his most formidable contributions to philosophy: Emile, Du Contrat Social and La Nouvelle Héloïse. But it was also at L’Ermitage that he became infatuated with Sophie d’Houdetot, Mme d’Epinay’s sister-in-law. Rousseau – if we
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are to believe Hume (Hume 1932: 527) – was a ladies’ man. In a memoir he wrote that ‘all the great ladies teaze me to be introduced to him: I had Rouleau thrust into my hand with earnest applications, that would prevail on him to accept them. I am persuaded, that were I to open here a subscription with his consent I should receive 50,000 pounds in a fortnight.’ Perhaps surprisingly for an un-saintly figure like Rousseau, he did not take advantage of his charm. Indeed, his female companions (with the notable exception of Mme de Warrens) were notably simple (Thérèse Levasseur) or (reportedly) downright ugly. Sophie d’Houdetot – who infatuated him more than any other woman – was, he writes (in Les Confessions (I: 442), ‘by no means handsome. Her face was pitted with smallpox, her complexion coarse, she was short sighted and her eyes were rather too round.’ Yet her character was ‘angelic, gentleness of the soul was the foundation of it.’ It was to this woman that he wrote Lettres Morales, written out of an uncontrollable – and immoral – obsession which blinded his already deficient judgement and led to a break with his benefactress.

Rousseau was not an easy man to deal with. Nor was his friendship with the philosophes strong enough to endure his continued attacks on the central theses in their belief system. Rousseau – like Kierkegaard – was easy to offend. The latter suffered a nervous breakdown when Aron Goldschmidt’s Corsaren depicted him as a hunchback. Rousseau broke down when Diderot, in the play Fils Naturel, noted that ‘I appeal to your heart, consult it, and it will tell you that the good man is part of society, only he is evil who lives alone’ (Diderot 1994–97 IV: 1113). It did not help that Diderot, in a subsequent letter to his erstwhile friend, wrote, ‘it is a rather odd citizen who is a hermit’ (Diderot V: 63). Diderot had hit a raw nerve – but also one that prompted Rousseau to make his most lasting contributions.

Two disciplines in particular have benefited from the contributions of Rousseau; political science and education (Putteman 1999). In both cases the inspiration was conceived not in Montmorency (where he settled following his eviction from L’Ermitage), but in the 1740s when he had practical experiences with these matters.

We often fail to appreciate that Rousseau, like many others (Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Marx and Locke come to mind), was a practical man, not an ivory tower theorist. Most contemporary thinkers are detached from the practical world; their concerns are theoretical in origin and abstract in outcome. The classics were not theoreticians by profession but by inclination. Machiavelli did not see himself as a philosopher but as a political practitioner; the same was true for Alexis de Tocqueville (a deputy and a foreign minister), John Stuart Mill (an MP), Karl Marx (a political
activist), Edmund Burke (an MP) and the later American president James Madison. Rousseau belongs to this school of writers. Like many of his peers, he was not a paid up member of the intellectual elite, he was rather driven to write; to see the deeper significance in seemingly mundane things. It is perhaps this more than anything else which is the hallmark of the genius. To earn a living Rousseau had worked as a tutor (and male nanny) for Mably’s children – an ordeal, if we are to believe him, but one which inspired him to write *Emile*.

It is commonly assumed that Rousseau was a dreamer, a vagabond, *un reveur solitaire*. He was those as well, yet he was also an able practitioner (his diplomatic dispatches, printed in Vol. III of *Oeuvres Complètes*, are testament to this). And it is telling that it was his experiences as secretary at the French Embassy in Venice which inspired him to write *Du Contrat Social* – not abstract considerations or armchair theorising. Of course he was not alone in this. The English Civil War prompted Hobbes to take up his pen, just as social inequality prompted Marx to follow suit. The list could go on indefinitely.

Rousseau was a successful writer, at least when measured by his influence. Yet his masterpieces were not well received by his contemporaries, and still less by his compatriots. Rousseau was expelled from France following the publication of *Emile*, and in Geneva the book was burned by the public prosecutor. His misfortunes began in June 1762. At two o’clock in the morning on the ninth of that month, Rousseau received a note from the Duchess of Luxembourg. The message was as simple as it was alarming; the *Grand Chambre* would – the following day – issue a warrant for his arrest. He immediately decided to flee. He summoned Thérèse to tell her the bad news. He later recalled telling his companion, ‘you have shared the good days of my prosperity. It now remains for you, since you wish it, to share my miseries. Expect nothing but insults and disasters henceforth. The fate that begins for me on this unhappy day will pursue me to the last hour of my life’ (I: 583). This prediction was sadly accurate.

His sin – which he rejected and refuted in *Lettres écrites de la montagne* – was the alleged godlessness of his fictional character the ‘Savoyard Vicar’. Did he expect this? Was he prepared for these – in part self-inflicted – sufferings? Almost certainly not. So why did he suffer this plight? One can distinguish between three aspects of a philosopher’s work: what the author wanted to write; what he actually wrote; and how the writings are read. Rousseau was misunderstood, possibly because what he wrote was different from what he intended to write, but possibly also because it was convenient for the authorities to have a scapegoat on whom to blame all
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As a public intellectual Rousseau was a useful tool for politicians – and this was exploited in the internal politics, not least in Geneva, where the elite used the publication of Emile as a pretext for tightening of the laws on censorship.

It was almost certainly this adversity which led Rousseau into what resembles madness. Yet his madness – if it may be called such – was never the only mood (and it is, therefore, questionable if his condition meets the requirement of a mental disorder as defined by psychiatrists). Pathological depressions are characterised by a continued and relentless state of mental paralysis. Rousseau’s condition was not like that. Having escaped to Neuchatel, and subsequently to Île de Saint Pierre, he found time to write Projet sur la constitution de la Corse, a thoughtful application of his political philosophy requested by the insurgent Corsican government.

It is possible that Rousseau exacerbated the hostility towards him. Yet one cannot in fairness accuse a man of paranoia who has suffered the indignity of being dispelled from three countries, and whose house has been stoned by the angry mob – as was the case in Môtiers (Cranston 1997: 116). But maybe Rousseau suffered more because he reacted more strongly than other philosophers. His fate was not unlike that of other great minds similarly condemned to be fugitives. That is writers who, like Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Hobbes, Nicolo Machiavelli, John Locke, Albert Einstein and Karl Marx, had to seek refuge for fear of the consequences of their writings. What is certain is that Rousseau – being a novelist as much as a philosopher – was perversely inspired by his sufferings, and transformed these sufferings to his autobiographical writings. Adversity certainly did his philosophical writings no favours. His major philosophical works were conceived and produced in tranquillity. His autobiographical works, on the other hand, were the result of mental suffering and political repression.

No wonder Rousseau fascinated, and as the continued output of books on his life suggest, continues to fascinate. His life, as much as his books, appeals to us because he could transform despair into prose; sufferings into eloquence.

We are seeking guidance at a time where there is none, and so we reach back to the age of the giants – the titans of our species who may teach us. In old Norse mythology there is a word for these figures – a Skjald. That is someone who, like Dostoevsky, Francis of Assisi, Virgil, Dante or Shakespeare, has travelled to the twilight-zone beyond good and evil, and who has returned to reveal their insights in myths and tales. Rousseau is the Skjald, the writer who has diagnosed the malady of the modern age,
and transformed it into prose. We do not seek to measure men, still less to rank them against each other. We merely strive to learn from their trials and tribulations – and in this we can seek solace in the works of Rousseau.

On 2 June 1778, Rousseau died in Ermenonville. He was laid to rest on the Isle de Peupliers. Rousseau lived and died, but death did not end it. It was Rousseau’s fate in life as well as in death to be an instrument of political expediency. In the early 1770s, the French government sought to utilise Rousseau to kill two diplomatic birds with one philosopher’s stone. Anxious to maintain the balance of power in Europe, the French government was alarmed by Russia’s and Prussia’s influence over Poland. Yet France was politically and militarily too weak to intervene. The government wanted to support the Council of the Bar (the noblemen opposed to the election of Stanislaw II as king of Poland), yet they feared the consequences of official association with the insurgents. They shared their aspirations, yet were rightly doubtful of their chances of success. What could they do? Rousseau came in handy. The government offered Rousseau political asylum, on the condition that he refrained from writing about politics, and then asked him to do exactly this; to write a proposal for a constitutional settlement in Poland (in secrecy, that is).

The Poles had expected more but could hardly reject the offer of expert advise from the most famous philosopher of the time. Louis XV, on his part, could dissociate himself from involvement by pointing to Rousseau’s madness, and at the same time support his allies. And so it came to pass that Rousseau, out of political expediency, wrote his last work of political philosophy, *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne et sur sa réformation projetée* (1771).

The republican Rousseau’s reputation came in handy for the monarchical regime. The same was true for the populist tyrants after the French revolution. Deceased political thinkers have one pre-eminent recommendation; they do not object to the abuse of their ideas. ‘It is Rousseau’s fault’, said one of the characters in *Les Misérables*. And the fictional character can be excused for reaching this conclusion. Yet it is perhaps more accurate to say that it was Robespierre’s fault. More than anyone Maximilien de Robespierre, architect of the terror regime of the French Revolution, is responsible for having created the noxious Rousseau. At the height of his powers, in 1792, the demagogue presented himself as the self-anointed incarnation of the General Will. Addressing the Jacobins he confidently declared; ‘For us, we are not of any faction … our will is the General Will’ (cited in O’Brien 2002: 301). It is difficult to exaggerate the amount of damage done to Rousseau’s name by this statement.
Robespierre’s death did not alter Rousseau’s position; the new regime needed him just as much as the previous one had. Declaring that Robespierre had ‘falsified Rousseau and that they themselves were the true heirs’ (O’Brien 2002: 302), they even strengthened the cult.

The revolutionaries wasted no time in squeezing political capital out of Rousseau’s corpse. Anxious to acquire legitimacy for their regime, they exhumed the remains of the celebrated ideologue and brought his body to Paris where, by cruel irony, his coffin was placed next to Voltaire’s. On the way to the Partheon – the converted church of Sainte Genevieve – a large crowd had assembled. It is reported that they chanted ‘Vive la mémoire de Jean-Jacques Rousseau!’

Notes


The political philosophy of Rousseau

3 See, for example, 'Rousseau et la Révolution' in Études Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Reims: Editions l’Écart, 1987–), Musée Jean-Jacques Rousseau de Montmorency.


6 The first mention of his abandonment of his children is in a letter to Mme de Francueil in 1751. His own account of the story in Les Confessions can be found at Vol. I, pp. 1416–22.

7 Though interested readers may wish to consult Philip Robinson, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Doctrine of the Arts (Berne, 1984) and R. Wokler, Rousseau on Society, Politics, Music and language. An Historical Interpretation of his Early Writings (New York: Garland, 1987).

8 Diderot’s support for his friend has greatly puzzled scholars. Gita May offers this reflection; ‘One can but wonder why Diderot did not immediately recognise the Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts as a clear and flagrant repudiation of everything the Encyclopédie stood for. Indeed he did everything in his power to promote the success of the Discourse. Perhaps it was because he was a loyal, generous, and steadfast friend eager to see Rousseau’s essay win the price, but perhaps also because he not only admired Rousseau’s rhetorical virtuosity but also subconsciously acknowledged that the darker more ominous message of the Discourse deserved to be taken seriously’. Gita May, ‘Rousseau, Cultural Critic’, in Susan Dunn (ed.), The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 263.

9 There are several similarities between Kierkegaard and Rousseau, although few studies compare the two. The classic study remains Ronald Grimsley’s ‘Kierkegaard and Rousseau’, in Grimsley, Søren Kierkegaard and French Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).

10 It should be noted that Voltaire parted company with the other philosophers of the Enlightenment on the subject of religion. Voltaire developed a philosophy that saw Newton’s physics as a manifestation of the glory of God. ‘The whole philosophy of Newton leads necessarily to the knowledge of a Supreme Being, who created everything, arranged everything of his own free will’. Voltaire quoted in N. Hampson, The Enlightenment (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 79. Yet – as is well-known – he did not believe that God was all-powerful or good. Scepticism regarding the latter was the theme of Candide.

11 An example of his poetry is Le Verger des Charmettes: ‘Tantot avec Leibniz, Malabrance et Newton/Je monte ma raison sur un sublime ton/Examine les lois des corps et des pensées/avec Locke je fais l’histoire des idées’, quoted in P.
The politics of the soul


12 However, Immanuel Kant was the exception: the Prussian wrote, ‘After Newton and Rousseau, God is justified, and Pope’s thesis is henceforth true’ (Kant quoted in V. Gourevitch, ‘The Religious Thought’, in Riley (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau, p. 193).


15 The vicar is, of course a literary character. Yet, as Roger Masters has noted, ‘Rousseau … explicitly acknowledges the view of the vicar as similar, though not identical to his own’ (The Political Philosophy of Rousseau (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 55). N.J.H. Dent believes that ‘there is no doubt that the vicar’s views are his own’. N.J.H. Dent, Rousseau Dictionary (Blackwell: Oxford, 1992), p. 77. Rousseau himself wrote that the result of his research on ‘religious matters was more or less [à peu près] what I have written down in my Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar’ (III: 55). Yet at other times he seemed to distance himself from the views of the vicar, for example in Letters écrites de la Montagne, where he denounces the views of the vicar as ‘fictional’ (III: 750).


17 This singular fact was revealed by Voltaire. There is no reason to doubt that it was true. It is interesting that Rousseau, in his Fragments Politiques, cites a statistic showing that 5,082 of the 19,202 children born in Paris in 1758 had been handed over to the foundling home (III: 528).

18 Fortunately these are now all available thanks to the late R.A. Leigh’s lifetime achievement, the collection of the Correspondance Complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

19 His attack was part of a musical dispute, which has later become known as the Querelle des Bouffons. The dispute had erupted in August 1752; Rousseau entered the debate in 1753. He argued that Italian music, based on melody and voice, was closer to the moral, meaningful, nature of music. French music, by contrast, was not. The differentiated sound worlds of the French language and French music, argued Rousseau, revealed a process of disintegration.
The political philosophy of Rousseau


21 I owe this observation to Professor Rodney Barker, LSE.

22 René Girard has developed a theory of the sociological ‘need’ for scapegoats. ‘In Greek mythology, the scapegoat is never wrongfully accused. But he is always magical. He has the capacity to relieve the burden of guilt from society. This seems a basic human impulse. There is a need to consume scapegoats. It is the way tension is relieved and change takes place.’ This might – or might not – fit Rousseau’s case. (Girard quoted in J. Klein, *The Natural, The Misunderstood Presidency of Bill Clinton* (New York: Coronet, 2002), p. 184).